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EPI

Judging Dept.

Angus Jameson

Student

HPM&B

2

Shelley Zansky PhD

Dept or Program Years in program

Mentor

Foodborne Outbreaks in New York State 1980-2001: The Role of the Commercial Food Service Worker

Author (s)

Angus Jameson, Shelley Zansky PhD, Raymond Woron MPH & Bridget Anderson

Despite improvements in food handling processes such as the implementation of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) system, foodborne diseases remain a significant cause of morbidity. In this analysis, the contribution of food handlers to the spread of foodborne illness and the impact of the 1992 prohibition of bare hand contact with ready to eat food in New York State (NYS) was evaluated.

Data was derived from the outbreak database maintained by the NYS Department of Health Bureau of Community Sanitation and Food Protection. From 1980-2001, 2262 outbreaks met the case definition of two or more individuals becoming ill following consumption of a common food or foods and were included in this analysis.

Infected food handlers were implicated in 280 of the outbreaks. Of these, 243 (87%) involved commercial food service workers, 34 (12%) involved non-commercial food preparers, and 3 (1%) involved production food workers. After peaking in the early 1990's, an overall decline in the number of outbreaks was observed. The proportion of outbreaks attributed to infected commercial food service workers did not significantly change in the years following the prohibition of bare handed contact. However, outbreaks associated with infected commercial food service workers continue to have significantly higher numbers of persons made ill per outbreak.

While the overall number of foodborne outbreaks in NYS is declining, food service workers continue to play a major role in the propagation of these events. We must strive for improved compliance with HACCP and state guidelines.